

# The Learning Community

## Newsletter of Perlman Center for Learning & Teaching

**"The essential purpose of the LTC is to develop programs to promote faculty and student reflections on and conversations about teaching and learning, thus enhancing even further the quality of student learning and faculty vitality."**

### SPRING, 2014

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## The Learning Community

by Fred Hagstrom, LTC Director

As a part of our cooperation grant with Saint Olaf, staff in the library and IT have undertaken to run informational sessions they call learning communities. These have run throughout this academic year. So far, they have been running independently at each school, but the expectation is that this will be a place for greater collaboration between the two schools. I have attended a number of the sessions this year, and I found them to be helpful and informative. Despite our busy schedules, I hope that we can put these sessions more in the spotlight in the coming year. I have been at sessions where I thought that colleagues would probably also benefit from the information that was shared. I understand how easy it is to miss out on things that could be helpful due to time constraints. But I thought that if this newsletter included information on what this group has been doing, it could help to increase interest in the coming year.

I will offer a few examples. One session was on digital scholarship, specifically the issues faced in creating work that will be posted online. Shana Sippy showed examples of an online project that had impressive contributions from her students. It was clear that the course had made significant use of a particular form of writing and research that was appropriate for a more public venue. The work was rigorous and carefully done, but it was also a bit different in tone from traditional papers. There was certainly no drop in quality, and it might be argued that the demands of putting work into a more public realm than a traditional assigned paper brought out a degree of care and attention to detail in the work the students did. In addition to it being a good experience for the students, it provided something that would be of use to the broader community. Similarly, Tun Myint showed examples of a project where he had students write postings for Wikipedia pages. There was a high standard of research, citation, and quality. Again, the expectations are a bit different than for a typical paper, but it was clear that standards were high and that it was a valuable and different experience for the students.

These are examples of what is being called the "porous classroom" where work done by students is visible to a larger audience, and the students rise to the occasion. Expanding these types of assignments is one of the things we could be working toward with the formation of our consortium formed with similar liberal arts colleges to explore the advantages of online learning.

I am sure that other colleagues are experimenting with similar approaches. But I only learned of this by attending the learning community sessions. It was an example of what we hope for on our campus- sharing new ideas about teaching and talking over the challenges and rewards of these new methods. Kristin Partlo has been a primary contact person for these learning community sessions. I was reminded again of how important a role staff in the library and in IT can play in our classes. The professors that presented all agreed that they have received great support in working out these new methods. Some of the sessions were on specific technological tools that we could use in teaching, while others were more based on learning goals and methods. At each session the presenters were well organized and full of information. I encourage anyone to keep an eye out for the learning community sessions next year.



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## The Future Learning Technologies Group

As LTC Director I have been attending the meetings of the Future Learning Technologies Group, and I will also attend the consortium meeting with our peer schools that are considering how new technological approaches can enhance our teaching. I thought that I would use this forum to offer some reactions to how I think this process is going. Just as I was accepting the position of directing the LTC, it became clear that considering technology was going to be a prominent agenda item for us in the coming years. I was curious as to how much technology was going to be a part of LTC programming during my time as Director.

I would say that there is not a top-down effort to push us to include technology in our teaching. Rather, I think there is a clear idea that technology is changing quickly, as are our students, and that when we feel it is appropriate to address technology in teaching, there should be some support to do so wisely and creatively. The FLTG and the consortium for online learning were formed initially because we and other colleges were invited to join in online learning partnerships with companies that provide content for online classes. Fairly quickly, it was clear that the agendas of these providers probably did not fit the mission and character of a school like ours. But it was also clear that ignoring how technology already affects our teaching, and how it might be better utilized in the future, would be a mistake. My personal reactions to the issues raised by increased use of technology are that I think it is crucial that we make smart and economically sound decisions on how this could affect our curriculum. Two Issues stand out to me.

First, it is obvious that we are going to have to address the issue of possible credit or pre-requisite credit for courses students might take online. The challenge is that it is difficult to assess the quality of online courses when so many are offered. If we were to make an overall decision to disallow online courses, we might be ruling out some perfectly valid and rigorous classes. While AP and International Baccalaureate classes are accepted for credit, they also come with some kind of guarantee of quality and standards. The open world of online courses has no comparable governing body that could set or maintain standards. We know that some of our students have advantages of coming from programs that allow them to enter Carleton with a good amount of earned credits. If good online courses were available to students who lack access to programs like AP, it could help to address this gap in resources. But there is no doubt that it will require some method of determining how well or how much students have learned from an online course.

Second, I think we have to be careful about how online sessions are used in our courses, keeping an eye on maintaining the character of teaching we value at Carleton. I am sure that these things can be used creatively to enhance a class. We have had some good sessions at the LTC where colleagues showed how pre or post class sessions accessed online can help to keep the class moving forward. But it will require new skills as teachers for those who make use of it, and it will also require considerable support from staff to have it done well. It might be my age, but I also have some concern about the idea of screen reading versus paper reading, and the general issue of distracted reading. I know that one can be distracted while reading from a book as well. But I have been hearing about some colleagues who see a declining quality of retention and understanding in students during discussions based on readings.

## The End of the Year

This is the end of my first year as LTC Director. Next year I will be away for winter term teaching my off campus program, but I will serve as the Director for fall and spring. I have always had a great deal of appreciation for the LTC, but this has increased with my inside view. I have been especially impressed by the things that are in place to help new faculty members. None of this existed when I started at Carleton. One of my favorite activities has been the small scale mentoring lunch meetings that have been held for first and second year faculty. At each of these, two senior colleagues have presented and offered advice on topics like grading, advising, developing a research agenda, etc. The senior faculty have been generous with their time, thoughtful, and honest. For either people on the tenure track, or for people on short-term appointments, the mentoring program and the weekly LTC sessions offer a great way to enter the profession of teaching.

I recently contacted a number of colleagues to ask if they would be willing to serve as a mentor to new faculty members that will start in the fall. Every person I contacted was eager to participate. I think this is something we should not take for granted. It would have been reasonable for people to respond to me with how busy they are. Certainly we all are very busy. The fact that people were so happy to help out is a very good sign for our culture.

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